Help Desk

*By Kevin Savetz**

Q How can I get a distinctive e-mail address for my business?

A Not only does a custom address look good on a business card, it can make your e-mail address easier for associates to remember. (After all, wouldn't you rather be **manager@furniture.com** than **user430@bignet.net**?) Luckily, it's not difficult to get a snazzy e-mail address.

There are two ways to get a custom e-mail address, both of which can be accomplished with the help of your service provider. The quicker method involves asking for a specific e-mail account name. This means you can have whatever you want before the @ sign of the e-mail address, but you're stuck with your service provider's domain name (the part of the address after the @ sign.) This method can yield an address like **furniture@bignet.net** (assuming, of course, your service provider is **bignet.net**!). Your service provider will probably give you a custom account name for a nominal fee, or perhaps for free.

The other method involves getting your own domain name—your own identity after the @ sign. You don't need to be a service provider or run any special equipment to have a domain name. Instead, you can just ask your service provider to set up an alias from your custom domain name to their computers. So, e-mail to (for instance) **manager@furniture.com** will actually get to you at the account **manager@bignet.net**, although your customers don't have to know that. Getting a custom domain name can take a few weeks, and may cost you $50 to $100. Ask your service provider for details.

What happens when you request a domain name? Your service provider must make a request to the InterNIC, the network information center for the Internet. Among other chores, the InterNIC is in charge of registering domain names so that (for instance) two organizations aren't using the same one. (That would be confusing to both humans and computers.) In a few weeks, the overloaded InterNIC staff will handle your service provider's domain name request, and (if it isn't already in use) approve the addition of the domain name. After some technical magic on your service provider's part, your domain name will be available for the world to use.

Q I'm trying to find an Internet service provider for my business. How important is it for a provider to belong to CIX?

A CIX stands for Commercial Internet eXchange—it's an organization of Internet service providers who agree to pass commercial traffic over their lines. It used to be very important to be sure your service provider was a CIX member if you wanted to do business on the Internet. Today, though, there are a variety of other networks though which you can pass commercial traffic legally—your service provider doesn't necessarily need to be a CIX member anymore.

To understand why CIX membership matters less than it once did requires some background: back in the old days of the Internet—until about 1985—the network could only be used for educational and research purposes. Since the National Science Foundation paid for the Internet's "backbone"—the central communications lines that linked most of the Internet—it called the shots. The NSF said that traffic not in support of research and education wasn't to traverse their network.

Doing business on the Internet seemed like a good idea to some. So, a few large Internet service providers teamed together in 1991 to form the CIX, a member organization that created its own Internet "backbone" parallel to the NSFNET. With their own lines for transmitting information, the CIX could make its own rules. Rule number one, as you might guess, was that commercial traffic was not taboo. For the first time, anyone could join this organization and could (legally!) do business online, hawking their wares, sending e-mail to business associates, and so on.

CIX members simply agreed to pass along the traffic of other CIX members. Because enough big players were CIX members, it was possible for commercial traffic to move from one end of the Internet to another without using the National Science Foundation's NSFNET. Today, your service provider may be connected to any of several newer backbones through which you may do business, and some of those are less expensive to your service provider than membership in the CIX.

So, while it is important that you ask your service provider if it's alright to do business from their network, it's not important if they are a member of the

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**The Help Desk is a regular feature of this newsletter. Questions are answered by Kevin Savetz, a contributing editor of the* Guide *and author of* Your Internet Consultant *(SAMS, 1994). You can submit questions care of David Peal, at (202) 739-9541 or* dpeal@ix.netcom.com.

CIX organization. A provider that is a CIX member isn't necessarily a better or a worse provider than a non-CIX member.

Q How do I set up a World Wide Web server for my business?

A Running a WWW server—so that your customers (or potential customers) can interactively learn about your products or services—is an appealing and increasingly popular way to market on the Internet. There are two ways to get it done: do it yourself, or pay someone else to do it for you.

If you want to do it yourself, your business will need several things: a permanent connection to the Internet running at 56 kbps or more, a computer dedicated to acting as your Web "server," the server software (the program that actually hands out the information that connecting users request), and—perhaps most important—a person who is familiar with (or can learn) HTML—Hypertext Markup Language, the language that describes what your Web pages look like.

Despite what you may have heard, HTML isn't that difficult to learn. (If you can handle BASIC, then HTML should be a breeze.) You can get some help through one of the new books that teach you the ways of HTML. John December's new book, for example, the *World Wide Web Unleashed* (SAMS Publishing) contains a large section dedicated to the whole process of creating a Web site, from designing "pages" to implementing them in HTML, maintaining them, and letting the world know about them.

However, if you don't have the time, the design inclination, or a fast enough connection to maintain a Web page yourself, consider letting someone else run your server for you.

In the past year, dozens of companies have appeared on the Internet that will, for a price, set up and maintain your Web server at their site. If you use one of these services, you won't have to learn HTML or dedicate a computer to act as a server. Indeed, you don't even need an Internet connection. (See "Webs of Influence" on page 3 for information about a new organization of Web service providers.)

Choosing the company to create and maintain your Web page is not a trivial task. A primary consideration is the cost. The prices for such services are all over the board, ranging from $10,000 annually down to a mere $25 a month. Some services charge a flat fee; others charge by the amount of disk space you use on their server.

The surprising part is this: a $10,000 a year Web page isn't necessarily better than a $300 one. You can't judge a Web service by price alone. Instead, ask many questions, and judge the quality of the service by the answers you get. Here are some questions to ask a potential Web provider:

- How fast is their connection to the Internet? The faster it is, the more traffic their server can handle.
- Look at examples of other Web pages they maintain. Are they graphically pleasing, with clean on-screen images? Are they free from typographical errors? Will the provider design the pages for you, or work with you to give you the online "look" your company wants and the image it wants to project?
- How much Internet publicity will a provider do for you—will your server be listed in the NCSA (now GNN) What's New page and in directories of commercial Internet providers, and announced in the appropriate newsgroups and mailing lists? Ask if they work to maintain ongoing interest in your server, or if they announce it only when it comes online. Good online promotion combined with traditional promotion on your part (putting your Web site's address in your print advertisements, calling card, company newsletter, and so on) are essential to a successful Web site.
- As your marketing needs change, how will changes to the content or design of your pages be made? Will the provider make changes? At what cost, and are there any hard-disk restrictions?
- Finally, talk to other clients. Are they happy with the service they received at the price they paid? Do you like their pages?

Will your server be listed in the NCSA (now GNN) What's New page and in directories of commercial Internet providers, and announced in the appropriate newsgroups and mailing lists?

Make sure to get everything in writing, and hold your Web provider to the terms of your contract. Once you are up and running, make sure your provider will give you usage statistics in a format that's useful for you and that indicates what is working and what is not working at your site. ◆

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